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### Making Micro-Aggressions Visible: An Interview with Kiyun Kim

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## An Interview with Kiyun Kim

By Michael Serazio

In recent years, a renewed awareness of the power of language and representation has taken hold on college campuses. Syllabi now feature “trigger warnings,” the advance notice of potentially disturbing content, while “safe spaces” are being established to provide public shelter for those suffering from emotional trauma. A related term in this emerging lexicon of sensitivity is “micro-aggressions”: those daily insults and indignities that students of lesser demographic privilege endure – deeply felt, but often under the radar of a culture more attuned to the overt racial hostilities of earlier eras (of which many, too, persist). When Kiyun Kim, a recent Fordham graduate, documented some of these micro-aggressions experienced by her fellow students, her photo series went viral and the national media took notice: coverage followed in *The New York Times*, *New*

*York* magazine, *The Huffington Post*, and *Buzzfeed*, among other outlets. She shared her perspective on the project with *Conversations* magazine in a Q & A dialogue – a fitting format, perhaps, given that the ethic of empathy solicited by her subjects requires us hearing about difficult conversations in their own words.

*How did you develop the idea for the project and what were you hoping it might accomplish?*

I created this series in 2013 during my sophomore year in college. I had been learning (and am still learning) about racism and how it operates in the U.S. And, as a woman of color, I don’t think it’s a huge mystery why I’m so passionate about it. As part of an art final, I had to “create something honest.” I had been thinking of making a piece about my opinions on racism for a

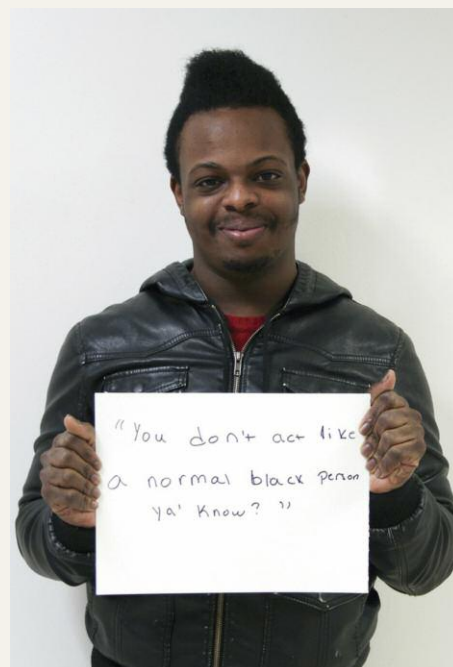
while and I thought this was the perfect opportunity. What’s not honest about personal experiences of racism?

*Is there a reason you emphasize “in the U.S.” when you discuss race/racism with your series?*

There are aspects of racism that are widespread globally – white supremacy and anti-blackness are present across many cultures. However, I do not want to imply that the way racism shows up in the U.S. is the same across the globe – I feel that kind of thinking can creep towards cultural imperialism and western hegemony.

*What did you think when the photo series got circulated by major websites? How did you feel about the subsequent coverage of it?*

When I posted the series on my Tumblr, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t hope



that it would go viral. I was proud of my work and wanted it to reach a large audience, and I thought Tumblr was as great place to try to do that since there's a large platform of social justice-oriented people on there. I'm grateful that I was able to communicate to many people through the series. There were people who agreed with the message and understood my intentions, and there were people who thought I was making a big deal out of nothing. But I think the fact that the project became so widespread showed the growing awareness of racism in this country.

*How would you – and/or your photographed subjects – define micro-aggressions? How can a big institution like a Jesuit university – or just individuals within it – try to address this problem?*

I believe micro-aggressions are only a symptom of a larger problem – racism. Yet many of us are not challenging or even naming this problem, and one of the ways it manifests itself is through these passive comments. We first have to come to an understanding of what racism really is if we want to start making progress. Many

people still hold the belief that racism only works at an individual level and that racists are only those who actively hate and blatantly discriminate against people of color (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan). This is a common thought especially among white people because it allows them to avoid confronting their own prejudices. The truth is that racism never went away – it only evolved. It just became more quiet and subtle. For generations, racism has been taught, consciously and subconsciously. We have to address that racism works on the macro (systemic, institutional) and micro (personal, individual) level. Institutions like a university should require social justice courses or, at the very least, provide access to information and resources about racism.

*Finally, it seemed like there was a range of expressions on the faces of the students in your photo essay – does that reflect the range of emotional reactions to the aggressions?*

There were subjects who asked me what kind of facial expression they should make, but I didn't really have an answer for them. I told them that the expression they make is completely

up to them – all I asked for was for them to be looking into the camera.

I did hope that I would end up with a range of facial expressions – what I didn't want was a series of photos with everyone wearing the same blank, dull expression. Not only would that have been boring to look at, but also I didn't think that would communicate the complex range of emotions we feel in regard to micro-aggressions. We might get offended, angry, or annoyed – the obvious negative reactions. But there are also times when we feel disappointed, speechless, baffled, confused, shocked. Sometimes we just want to laugh because of how ridiculous or ignorant a comment is. I also enjoyed the diverse range of emotions because it brought out the individuality of each subject.

Kiyun Kim's additional micro-aggression portraits featured at <http://nortonism.tumblr.com/>

*Kiyun Kim graduated from Fordham University with a B.A. in visual arts in 2016. Michael Serazio is an assistant professor of communication at Boston College and a member of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.*

